COMMENTARY - After 100 years, caring still tops at Zambarano; [All Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

The complex now bears the name of Ubaldo E. Zambarano, a native of Providence, born on June 29, 1899. He was a graduate of Georgetown University's medical school, and then trained in various hospitals, where he learned the latest treatments for tuberculosis. Zambarano returned to Rhode Island, where he became its outstanding authority on tuberculosis and worked at the state's tuberculosis institution for the rest of his life. The Zambarano Hospital has just celebrated its 100th year of notable service to the state.

Yet as the number of Rhode Islanders with active tuberculosis diminished, the state found itself with a virtually empty hospital. So, after much debate, it re-dedicated the complex of buildings as a state institution for the care of those with chronic maladies. Zambarano Hospital is now an administrative division of the Eleanor Slater Hospital, based in Cranston. (Eleanor Slater Hospital is named for the longtime grande dame of Rhode Island Democratic politics, who had particular interests in housing, mental health, and the elderly. She died on March 11, at age 97.)

Zambarano's medical director is Normand L. Decelles Jr., a quiet and unassuming physician, born in Woonsocket and a 1984 graduate of Brown Medical School. Other than playing the classical guitar and raising a family in the neighboring community, Decelles dedicates his energies to the creation of a benevolent environment at Zambarano Hospital.

Full Text (963 words)

WHY DOES A COMMUNITY establish a hospital? Sometimes this is undertaken out of fear, sometimes for aggrandizement, but most usually in answer to a longstanding necessity.

Over the millennia, families have nursed their own at home. Thus the home was where the babies were born, the children were cared for during childhood diseases, injuries were tended to, and the older people lingered before dying. Only when the family could no longer cope with these medical burdens, or when there was no family, and after complicated lifesaving procedures had been invented, did society create institutions we now call hospitals.

Rhode Island's first hospitals were established to house people arriving on sailing vessels with signs of communicable disease, which might jeopardize the community. These rude shacks, called fever hospitals, were little more than dormitories. They isolated the successive victims of yellow fever, smallpox, cholera, and other contagions. When the need for quarantine no longer prevailed, these structures were quickly abandoned.

Rhode Island's first permanent hospital for the mentally deranged was built in the 1840s, but only after two centuries of anguished discussion. As early as 1650 Roger Williams appealed to the Providence Town Council to create a shelter for those "bereft of their senses," but little was done in Rhode Island beyond expanding the almshouses and poor farms maintained by the towns.

By 1827, Dexter Asylum had been established in Providence - with no pretense of humane care. It was charged with confinement of paupers, victims of debauchery, the uncontrollably insane, homeless women in labor, and malnourished immigrants. It was a congested warehouse, designed more to protect the community than to provide refuge for the distressed.

In 1844, the General Assembly endorsed a charter for a Rhode Island Asylum for the Insane, initiated by a $30,000 bequest in the will of a Providence merchant, Nicholas Brown. Cyrus Butler gave another $40,000, and various other community donors gathered an additional $57,000 to establish Butler Hospital, on 114 pastoral acres bordering the Seekonk River.

The drive to establish a general hospital came later, spearheaded by the physician Thomas Poynton Ives. Construction began in 1864 and Rhode Island Hospital -- today still the state's premier comprehensive hospital -- accepted its first patient, a carpenter with a tumor on his jaw, in 1868.

In the decades that followed, a number of other general and specialty hospitals were created in Rhode Island. The state also recognized the need to participate in the medical care of its citizens, so a complex of buildings was constructed on the Howard estate, in Cranston, to house a refuge for the chronically ill, as well as a workhouse and a prison.

Tuberculosis has constituted a threat since antiquity, but it emerged as a major public-health menace -- "the white plague" -- as a companion to the Industrial Revolution and its crowded cities. The European

countries recognized the dual merit of tuberculosis hospitals (called sanatoriums) in remote sites: first, as places for healing, and second, as places to isolate those who might spread tuberculosis to others.

In Rhode Island, the first well-designed building for consumptive (tubercular) patients was constructed on state-owned property in the northwest, on the shore of Wallum Lake. Over the years, this and other sturdy buildings in the village of Pascoag quietly and effectively served the medical and emotional needs of Rhode Islanders with tuberculosis.

The complex now bears the name of Ubaldo E. Zambarano, a native of Providence, born on June 29, 1899. He was a graduate of Georgetown University's medical school, and then trained in various hospitals, where he learned the latest treatments for tuberculosis. Zambarano returned to Rhode Island, where he became its outstanding authority on tuberculosis and worked at the state's tuberculosis institution for the rest of his life. The Zambarano Hospital has just celebrated its 100th year of notable service to the state.

Yet as the number of Rhode Islanders with active tuberculosis diminished, the state found itself with a virtually empty hospital. So, after much debate, it re-dedicated the complex of buildings as a state institution for the care of those with chronic maladies. Zambarano Hospital is now an administrative division of the Eleanor Slater Hospital, based in Cranston. (Eleanor Slater Hospital is named for the longtime grande dame of Rhode Island Democratic politics, who had particular interests in housing, mental health, and the elderly. She died on March 11, at age 97.)

Today, Zambarano Hospital lovingly tends to the comprehensive medical and behavioral needs of 115 long-term patients, with an average age of 52. These residents, most of whom are severely handicapped, suffer from such disorders as cerebral palsy, spinal- cord injury, multiple sclerosis, intractable epilepsy and numerous forms of organic dementia. The institution also houses an inpatient program for alcohol addiction, and is the site of Phoenix House, a facility providing substance-abuse therapy.

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He and his staff of about 400 devoted souls have converted the ancient red-brick buildings into a meticulously clean, hallowed establishment, offering superb medical care to those who fall outside the realm of customary medical care. The nursing staff maintains a warm and spiritually enhanced environment, in which each resident is known by name and each birthday is celebrated with affection. "We are all family here," says Dr. Decelles.

In an era when most hospitals are known for their technical capabilities, it is a joy to encounter a hospital where caring is the dominant mission.

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People: Zambarano, Ubaldo E, Decelles, Normand L Jr

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